

The Advisor

Resources for Supervisors, Managers, and Human Resources Personnel

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Encouraging Creativity in the Workplace

Throughout human history, creativity has been an essential aspect of great breakthroughs in art, science, and technology. The key ingredient in every major endeavor, from the Great Pyramids to the wonders of our digital age, is an imaginative vision that dares to try something new.

Creativity plays an important role in the everyday work world as well. A workplace that encourages creative thinking from its employees may more effectively meet customer needs, solve problems, and adapt to changes in business circumstances. Workers who sense that their ideas are valued may also have improved morale, which could lead to more engagement and less turnover.

While creativity is an innate quality that most people have to some degree, it can be ephemeral, and some individuals may be better at accessing it than others. Finding a way to tap into this resource and use it to solve problems, achieve goals, and improve the customer experience is an important element in management success. If you are looking for ways to draw on the creativity of your team, consider these suggestions:

- **Give creative ideas time to ferment.**

Creativity can't be forced — it must be allowed to happen. Many people in highly creative professions say that their best ideas come to them when they are not thinking about the subject at hand or when they are engaged in another activity. When wrestling



with a new idea, it is often helpful to follow the old adage to “sleep on it.” Subconscious processing, which occurs during sleep, is an important part of the creative process.

- **Avoid deadline-driven thinking.** While deadlines are a necessary part of doing business, they may get in the way of creative thinking. People who are under pressure to meet a deadline will go for the solution that is simplest or easiest to implement, not necessarily the best. If you want true innovation, keep timeframes out of initial discussions. Focus on finding a solution to the problem at hand — then figure out a realistic timeframe.

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- **Try alternative methods of brainstorming.** Instead of having a group brainstorming session, encourage team members to come up with ideas for solving a problem on their own. After a week or two, pull the group together and ask them to provide their ideas. Have a constructive discussion about the merits of the ideas proposed and look at ways to synthesize separate ideas together to create a useful plan of action. Contrary to popular belief, research shows that brainstorming alone is not that helpful in fostering creativity.
- **Focus on the positive.** Negativity kills creativity. Instead of getting frustrated about what you can't do, focus on what you can do. A "weakness" such as a small budget or a tight timeframe may actually become a strength if it helps you define the parameters within which your team must work. Remember that true creativity is the ability to find innovation within limits.
- **Look for connections.** What we call "original" ideas are, more often than not, a combination of disparate and seemingly unrelated concepts. Research shows that exceptionally creative people have an easier time making these unexpected connections. To facilitate this process, have people from differing disciplines sit down and discuss how they would find a solution to a particular problem. Encourage them to look for commonalities in their approach that may help them synthesize a workable solution.

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- **Challenge assumptions.** People tend to think in predictable patterns and stay with what is familiar. If they are jarred out of these patterns by an error or an unexpected development, they are more likely to rethink their assumptions and come up with creative ideas. It is useful to ask, "Why do we do this?", meaning does the process or method have value? If it does have value, the next question should be, "Why do we do it this way?"
- **Build on the past.** Even when challenging assumptions, it makes sense to avoid recreating the wheel. Ask your team to evaluate preexisting systems or materials and determine ways to adapt them into a solution that meets current needs. Remember that innovation is often the result of combining existing expertise with a newer idea or concept.
- **Identify strengths.** Creativity comes in

many permutations, and one person's particular strengths may be another's weakness. Take the time to get to know your direct reports, both through interaction at work and via more casual experiences, such as lunch hour board games or team meals or gatherings. Over time, you may begin to identify whose talents are best suited to finding creative solutions to particular sorts of problems. When possible, encourage employees to develop their natural aptitude through training and mentoring.

- **Don't micromanage.** As the old saying goes, "A watched pot never boils." The same is true for people attempting to do creative work. Clearly define the goal your team is working toward, then step back and give people space to do the work they are trained to do. Schedule periodic meetings to monitor progress and discuss and refine your current plan of action.
- **Stay on track.** One common byproduct of the creative process is a plethora of new ideas, some of which may be unrelated to the task at hand. While many of these suggestions may be worth pursuing, keep your team focused on addressing the problem in front of you. Save other worthy suggestions for later implementation or use them to make improvements if your first attempt needs refinement.
- **Embrace mistakes.** Mistakes are an integral part of the creative process. Creative solutions are often found via a process of elimination — people must figure out what doesn't work to find what does. The lessons learned from

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Recommended Reading

If you are looking for ways to spark creativity in yourself or inspire it in your team, the following books may be of interest:

Uncommon Genius: How Great Ideas are Born by Denise Shekerjian, Penguin Books, 1991.

Imagination First: Unlocking the Power of Possibility by Eric Liu and Scott Noppe-Brandon, Jossey-Bass, 2011.

Your Creative Brain: Seven Steps to Maximize Imagination, Productivity, and Innovation in Your Life by Shelley Carson, Jossey-Bass, 2012.

Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Harper Perennial, 1997.

Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration by Keith Sawyer, Basic Books, 2008.

Creative Thinkering: Putting Your Imagination to Work by Michael Michalko, New World Library, 2011.

The Art of Innovation by Tom Kelley and Jonathan Littman, Crown Business, 2001.

I, Steve: Steve Jobs in His Own Words by George Beahm (editor), Agate B2, 2011.



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mistakes are often the most valuable and may increase a person's ability to account for multiple variables within a process or system. Keep in mind that scientists launched many failed rockets before they came up with the design that allowed humans to reach the moon.

- **Seek inspiration.** One of your roles as a leader is to inspire others, but it is difficult to do if you don't also feel inspired. Recharge your batteries and absorb new ideas from the leading thinkers in your field by reading a book or taking a class or seminar. Get outside the closed loop of your own discipline by studying a different field or trying a new hobby that may expose you to

different ways of thinking. Constantly broadening your horizons will help you stay open to possibilities and create new avenues for your team to explore.

- **Be open to creativity.** As a manager, keep in mind that your response to creative ideas plays a large role in keeping them flowing. Be open to alternative perspectives and unorthodox solutions to problems. Actively engage your team by encouraging them to submit ideas for improvements whenever they occur, not just when there is a problem to be solved. Remember that creative breakthroughs have a way of presenting themselves when you least expect it.
- **Reward innovation.** Make a point of acknowledging innovation within your team. Provide employees who demonstrate creative thinking with positive feedback or, if applicable, formal recognition. On performance reviews, highlight examples of the employee's creative problem solving skills.

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